



MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE

A Documentary by
Christine Choy, Worth Long & Allan Siegel

MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE

"It is one of a plethora of works in film and art that show, contrary to popular perception, that the South has never had just two racial groups."

Imani Perry, The Atlantic

"A mosaic style of editing maintains the filmmakers' neutral theme--the triangle of inter-relatedness--but their use of three racially separate film crews to elicit dramatically honest responses carries its own message."

Pacific Film Archives

Directed by [Christine Choy](#), [Worth Long](#), [Allan Siegel](#)

Produced by Christine Choy

1984, 110 minutes (film version) or 78 minutes (video version), United States, English

Original Shooting Format: 16mm

Screening Formats Available: HD and SD File

Contact:

Third World Newsreel

545 8th Avenue, Suite 550, New York, NY 10018

(212) 947-9277 x 10, tw@tw.org



SYNOPSIS

This is an intimate portrait of life in the Mississippi Delta, where Chinese, African Americans and whites live in a complex world of cotton, labor, and racial conflict. The history of the Chinese community, originally brought to the South to work on cotton plantations after the Civil War, is framed against the harsh realities of civil rights, religion, politics, and class in the South. Rare historical footage and interviews of Delta residents are combined to create this unprecedented document of inter-ethnic relations in the American South in the 1980s.

REVIEWS

"A two-hour immersion in the Mississippi Delta, creating, with no other exposition than is contained in images and the words of persons being interviewed, a rich documentary brew."

Library Journal

"The finished film is peppered with moments that provide an unusual, but quite powerful critique of conventional film expectations with regard to ethnicity."

- Scott MacDonald, A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE is a film in which acknowledgement of human complexity reveals an extraordinary world among Blacks, Chinese and Whites in the Mississippi Delta. It is moving and powerful because it is not heavy or dogmatic. People will like it, scholars will embrace it."

- Emile de Antonio, Filmmaker

"We see and hear for the first time, personal stories of Chinese families in the Mississippi Delta--their history and their experiences. We recognize people who are Southern and have never given up their deeply rooted Asian identity."

- Louise Lo, Programmer for the Asian American Programming Consortium, CPB

"The work of veteran filmmaker Christine Choy has often been concerned with revising our commonly and uncritically held views, most often with hard-hitting footage that simply marvels."

- All Movie Guide

"...ethnicity, acculturation, racism and interracial associations, poverty, social and economic change, community development and much more."

- Neil McMillen, Prof. of History, Univ. of Southern Mississippi

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE deals with the American heartland, but not the heartland of waving fields of wheat and salt-of-the-earth white farmers. Instead it looks deep into the barren soul of U.S. racial relations... This is an important film of special-textural depth and lyrical toughness that challenges us to take a hard, honest look at ourselves."

John Kuo Wei Tchen, New York Chinatown History Project

"MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE uncovers the socio-political and economic roots of interracial tension. This is a critical undertaking because it undermines the notion that racism is simply a question of attitude, or worse, of some ingrained, quasi-genetic antipathy ascribed to 'human nature.'"

Richard Fung, Seeing Yellow: Asian Identities in Film & Video

"The directorial team consisted of a Chinese American woman (Choy), a Black man (Worth Long) and a white man (Allan Siegel), and they all interview their own communities (brilliant), so there is some eyebrow-raising truth-telling going on... By deeming Asian Americans as part of the triangle, Choy carves out space for us to have our own voice and agency, and not just be a wedge group that's silenced or pitted against other groups."

Saturday School Podcast

<https://soundcloud.com/saturdayschoolpodcast/season-7-ep-1-mississippi-triangle>

SCREENINGS, FESTIVALS & AWARDS

Independent Feature Market

Berlin International Film Festival

Amien International Film Festival

Carnegie Public Library, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Women's International Film Festival, Minneapolis

Greenville Public Library, Mississippi

Atlanta Third World Film Festival

Dorothy Eisner International Women's Film Festival

Women Direct Series of New Films by Women

Northwest Film Study Center

Capri Theater

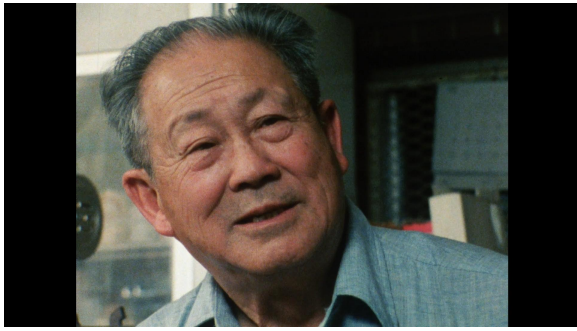
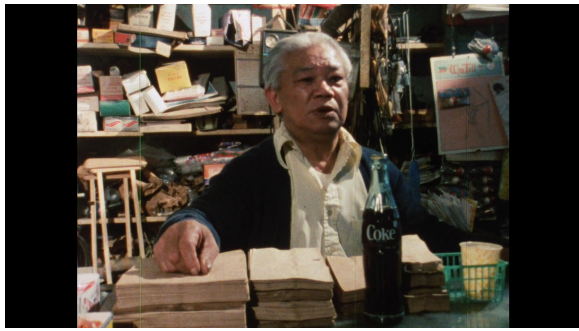
Jacson Historical Museum

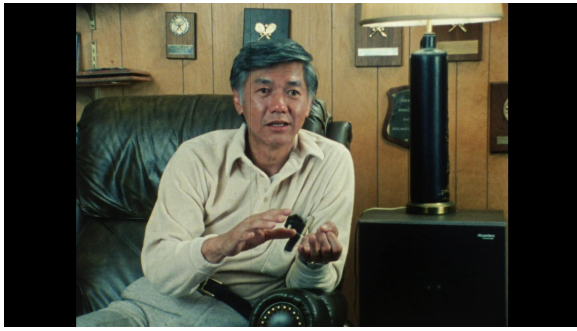
Asian American International Film Festival

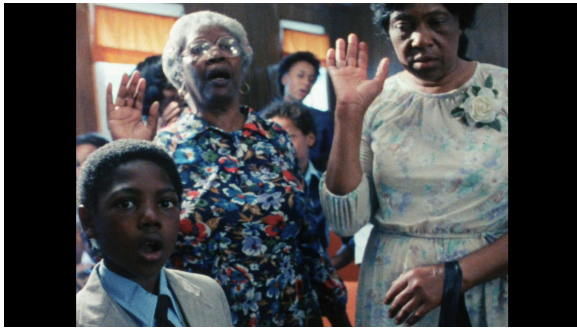
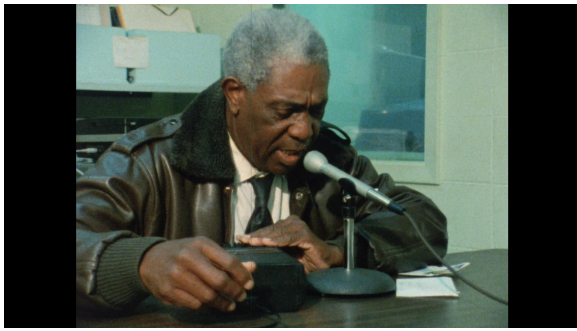
Filmex: Los Angeles International Film Exposition

Houston Museum of Fine Art

Brooklyn Academy of Music







PRODUCTION CREDITS

Major funding for this film was provided by
The National Endowment for the
Humanities

A Third World Newsreel Production

MISSISSIPPI TRIANGLE

Associate Producers

Pearl Bower

Yuet-Fung Ho

Original Music

Lee Ray

Unit Cinematography

Ludwig Goon

Principal Cinematography

Christine Choy

Kyle Kibbe

Co-Directors

Christine Choy, Worth Long and Allan

Siegel

Producer & Project Director

Christine Choy

Edited by Allan Siegel

Associate Editor

Jeffrey Solomon

Sound Editor

Jeffrey Solomon

Sound Recordist

J.T. Takagi

Sylvie Thouard

2nd Unit Director

Robert Nakamura

2nd Unit Cinematography

John Esaki

Additional Cinematography

Charles Burnett

Steven Ning

Assistant Camera

A.J. Fielder

Stephen Ning

J.T. Takagi

Additional Sound Recordists

Vieda Dette Cambell

Robert Nakamura

Bendali Yaro

Production Assistants

Amy Kato

Nobutaka Matzuo

Sally Smith

1st Apprentice Editor

Lynne Ijima

2nd Apprentice Editor

Carolyn Chen

Assistant Sound Editors

Lynne Iijima

Antoinette Tynes

Ada Gay Griffin

Project Consultants

Oliva de Torres

Juanita Howard

Shirley Hune
James Loewen
Ray Lou
Neil McMillen
James Silver
Jack Tchen

The Following People Appeared in the Film

Rosa Lea Black
Hon. Uita Blackwell
Rev. C.C. Carraway
The Late James Chow
John Dorsey
Elen Douglas
Father J. Guidy
Henry Goon
The Late Fannie Lou Hamer
Arleen Henn
Bill Holland
Eugene Joe
The Late Ray W. Joe
Lawrence King
Mei Kuan King
Sammie Kuan
Susan Lee
"Buster" Lewis
Mr. Liu
Beverly Lowery
Bertha Lum
Martha Lum
L.Y. Pang
Joe Shaldon
Audrey H. Sidney
Frank Smith
Kent Szeto
Hartman Turnbow
Mae Sula Watson
Kee Wing
Linda Sue Wing
Luck Wing
Francise Wong

Henry Wong
John Wong
"Spunky" Woods

Script Consultant
Brian Breger

Title and Photo Animation
Gary Becker

Location Music
Eddie Cusic
Fred Macdowell
Leon Penson
Kee Wing

Sound Mix
Tom Fleishman

Laboratory
T.V.C. Laboratories

Sound Transfer
Magno Sound

Negative Cutter
Marlin Schwieger

Research
Christine Choy
Marlene Dann
Sonja Green
Yuet-Fung Ho
James Loewen
Neil McMillen
Sally Smith

Photo Research
Pearl Bowser
Yuet-Fung Ho
Clarence Lusane

Archival Footage Research
Allan Siegel

Interviews

Pearl Bowser
Christine Choy
Sam Chu Lin
Yuet Fung Ho
Worth Long
Allan Siegel

Production Stills

Pearl Bowser
Christine Choy
Yuet Fung Ho
Allan Siegel
Sally Smith

Production Secretary

Ada Gay Griffin

Transcription

Kevin Dowd

Typist

Judy Ray

Legal

Martin Stolar Esq.

Accounting

Noah Kimmerling

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Robert Clark

Cleveland Chinese Baptist Church

Joe Cooper

Emile de Antonio

Delta Airlines/Gregg Hughes

Loni Ding

Farm Fresh

Greenville Civic Center

Greenwood High School

Kenneth Haxton

Honenberg Brothers

Eugene Horowitz

How Joy Restaurant

The Humphreys County Union for Progress,
Inc.

The Jackson Museum

Elaine Kim

Kwando Kinshasa

Margot lee

Lewis Ford Card Rental

David Liu

Freddie Love

M.A.C.E.

Roberta Miller

Mount Pleasant Baptist Church

National Archives

National Asian American Telecommunication
Association

Our Place Lounge

P.K. Food Market

Edward Pang

Pap Pang

William Alexander Percy Memorial Library

Riverview Inn

Jerome Seu

Jacqueline Shearer

Lola Shorter

Sam Sue

Wot Sue

The Szeto Family
Renne Tajima
Thunderbird Lounge
Trail Lake Plantation
WCLD Radio Station
WGVM Radio Station
Malcolm Walls
Westside School

The Late John Wing
Wong's Supermarket
Steven Yee

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Lessons From Black and Chinese Relations in the Deep South

Baldwin Lee, 'Mississippi Triangle,' and the limits of upward mobility

By Imani Perry

JUNE 10, 2022

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(Universal History Archive / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

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Mississippi Triangle is a 1983 documentary about the Black, white, and Chinese communities in the Mississippi Delta region, which I rewatched the other day, prompted by a message from a friend. It is one of a plethora of works in film and art that show, contrary to popular perception, that the South has never had just two racial groups.

The documentary had three directors, one from each of the abovementioned groups: Christine Choy, Allan Siegel, and Worth Long, each with their own crew. Two members of Long's team, Charles Burnett and Arthur Jafa, went on to have illustrious careers as filmmakers. But to the contemporary eye, *Mississippi Triangle* is a humble, if artful, production. The narrative arc is fuzzy, and so is the footage. But still it resonates. It begins with a Black man singing "Amazing Grace," then pans through the Delta landscape, piney woods and shotgun houses. The story is told through voices heavy with the distinctive vowels of the Deep South. A clear assertion is made: Chattel slavery and cotton production are the foundation of this place. Chinese people came as workers—some on the railroad, others in the fields—yet ultimately became situated in local economies as grocers. One white woman comments that the Chinese always seemed to hold themselves apart from white people. Unita Blackwell, then the mayor of Mayersville, Mississippi—a Black woman who was once a sex worker and a plantation worker, and then an organizer with the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee—says, in contrast, that the Chinese people were kinder

than white folks. And there was no confusion about who they were: They spoke Chinese, and they were Mississippians. The lesson of the documentary is crystallized in the story of Martha Lum, the child plaintiff in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, a case decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1927. The Lum children had been attending white schools in Mississippi, but in a wave of renewed anti-Chinese sentiment fueled by the 1924 Immigration Act (which banned all immigration from Asia), they were expelled and told they must attend the schools for African American children. They fought back, all the way to the Supreme Court. The Court sided with Mississippi, declaring that excluding Chinese children from white schools was not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Lum family was told that their children could either attend Black schools or create their own Chinese school. Anywhere was fine, as long as it wasn't white space.

I teach *Gong Lum v. Rice* in my class on race in American legal history. It was a "Jim Crow" case that affirmed the exclusion of all nonwhite people, and not just Black people, from white spaces. But its particulars are important, too. And this is what *Mississippi Triangle* shows. It was not the case that Chinese Mississippians occupied the same social location as Black people. But as nonwhite people they were subject to the whims of a white-supremacist order. Theirs was an intermediate status.

Chinese American commentators in the film describe the injustice of Jim Crow, and how they were ultimately beneficiaries of the civil-rights movement. When desegregation came, their fortunes changed in school and business. And yet, they also describe being hesitant to get too close to Black people. Teenager Linda Wing explains how even though she grew up with Black people, her family doesn't want her to date Black boys. Her speech pattern, interestingly, is not only southern, but it is Black and southern, and she says she has nothing against Black folks; she grew up with Black folks. But her reality is that she "don't have nobody to be with." The color line of the society, and her family's insistence that she not become immersed in the Black community, leaves her lonely.

More melancholy still is the voice of elderly Arlene Hen, the daughter of a Black mother and Chinese father. She describes in harrowing detail the debt bondage of the sharecropping system, how akin it is to slavery. Viewers are reminded that, by 1983, the laws have changed, but the economy, not so much. Workers in catfish plants, like those on cotton plantations, aren't even scraping by. And they are overwhelmingly Black. They are too poor to patronize the Chinese-owned groceries, which in turn suffer.

Young Chinese Mississippians are described as departing for big cities. An interracial relationship between two groups that was forged during Jim Crow has fallen apart. In the Mississippi of 1983, Arlene Hen's story is juxtaposed with that of other Chinese families whose children have attended white schools and who have created Chinese American religious communities. She tells her story to her granddaughters, Black girls with monolid eyes and heavy dark hair, and notes that because she is biracial, mixed with Black, she cannot be buried in the Chinese cemetery.

Racism is not just a matter of animus. It is produced by stratification. It is made by a social architecture of history, human relationships, laws, and the economy. It would be easy to watch this documentary and naively wonder: *Why are Chinese Mississippians discriminating against Black people, when they themselves are discriminated against?* The documentary's useful revelation is that when people are stratified, those who are neither at the top nor the bottom work mightily to preserve their position in the middle. The architecture is designed that way.

Those of us who are not middle-to-upper-class and white, yet are also not quite at the bottom due to our class, ethnicity, or education are—in the vulnerability of our status and the marketability of our privileges—incentivized to sustain hierarchies. Among African Americans like me, that can show up in the form of anti-immigrant politics, xenophobia, and classism. For others, it can rather easily manifest as prejudice against African Americans, particularly African Americans who have been poor for

generations. As one of the Chinese American commentators in the film notes, Black people are so stigmatized, it feels imperative to maintain a distance from them.

Years ago, I coined a term about how, at a personal level, we might reject these inclinations: *critical exceptionalism*. I used it to describe the way we might use our “not quite at the bottom” social locations to expose injustice. Or, as I’ve said in another way, “be critical at the site of our own privilege.” And that brings me to something else I’ve been thinking about: the work of photographer Baldwin Lee. It exemplifies critical exceptionalism and so much more.

In the same year that *Mississippi Triangle* was released, Lee, a Chinese American professor of photography at the University of Tennessee, set off on a trip across 2,000 miles of the American South. MIT- and Yale-educated, he settled in Knoxville and became the first director of the photography program at UT. He was already recognized as a gifted artist. And he has been a celebrated professor for decades. During that trip that began nearly 40 years ago, he took up what might seem to be unexpected subjects: Black folks, and particularly poor Black folks. Casey Gerald, a brilliant Black southern writer who published an essay about Lee last year (it will be included in the book *Baldwin Lee*, coming from Hunters Point Press this fall), has noted that this is not voyeuristic work. Rather, its intimacy proves that he earned the trust of his subjects. I agree.

Walker Evans was one of Lee’s teachers. Like Evans, Lee has a sensitive eye for both poverty and dignity. But Lee’s southern exposure wasn’t overwhelmingly white, as it was in Evans’s classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Quite the contrary, Lee is a witness to those at the bottom of U.S. stratification, and their refusal to swallow that status. In one image, little girls are outfitted in their Sunday best while standing on the porch of a dilapidated shotgun house in a rural Mississippi community that has no sewage system. Pristinely dressed, tenderly cared-for children live where sewage runs in the open. That is a South I know. Lee’s subjects, often children, pose, aware of their own elegance or grace or beauty.

The work is political, because it exposes the violence of poverty inherited from the plantation-economy past. But it is most of all attentiveness to the composure of his subjects that is echoed masterfully in the composition of his shots. A lean Georgia woman with what in another context might be called a patrician slouch gingerly carries a bouquet of collard greens. She looks delicate, but her thickly veined hands are clearly strong. In Mrs. Fulton’s kitchen in Natchez, Mississippi, everything in the room is in a state of disrepair but the cornflake boxes covered with faces: a little white boy in a Robin Hood costume, a Black woman, an Asian woman in a cheongsam, and a Latino baseball player are arranged, quilt-like, on a table. It looks to me like some kind of cultural-bricolage wallpaper.

We are a motley assortment of people in the United States. Our relations are not tidy, not in their beauty, nor in their disastrous disaffection and cruelty. It matters for us to witness today the daily violence experienced by Asian Americans, the horrific persistence of anti-Black racism, the dispossession of Indigenous people, the indecency of immigration and detention policies, and so on. We should celebrate our capacity to find love and common ground across difference, and feel shame when we step on the necks of those at the bottom while taking a shine to those at the top. And importantly, we shouldn’t be so sanguine in thinking that greater diversity in any place, or the “browning of America,” as some call it, means that we will treat people fairly. We’ve been trained in the exact opposite way. The work of witnessing might make us better, or at least more honest.

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Season 7, Ep. 1: Mississippi Triangle

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Entertainment



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Welcome back to Saturday School! This is our 7th season, and this semester, we'll be exploring Asian American interracial cinema. When we signed off last season, coronavirus had just taken hold and the nation had erupted with protests for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Black Lives Matter.

As racial tensions escalated, it had many Asian Americans grappling with questions like: What is our place in this? How can we help? How are we complicit? What can we do moving forward? And for us, thinking about our podcast, are there ways that Asian American film can cross racial lines to show that Asian Americans don't exist in racial silos and need to confront interracial issues?

As with most things, if we go back into the vault, we realize that there is a long history of Asian American interracial cinema, including some films in the spirit of social activism and solidarity.

This semester, we start with Christine Choy. She's most known for co-directing the seminal documentary "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" Before that, she co-directed the 1984 documentary "Mississippi Triangle," which looks at the intersections between the white, Black and Chinese communities in the Mississippi Delta from the late 1800s to the 1980s.

The directorial team consisted of a Chinese American woman (Choy), a Black man (Worth Long) and a white man (Allan Siegel), and they all interview their own communities (brilliant), so there is some eyebrow-raising truth-telling going on. Some of it feels dated, while other parts feel uncomfortably current. But by deeming Asian Americans as part of the triangle, Choy carves out space for us to have our own voice and agency, and not just be a wedge group that's silenced or pitted against other groups.

10 films, 10 weeks. Join us in our exploration.

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August 30, 2023

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60 Orphan Films to be Preserved through the NFPF's 2023 Grants

The National Film Preservation Foundation is thrilled to announce the recipients of its 2023 federally funded grants, which will allow 31 institutions across 13 states and the District of Columbia to preserve 60 films from their collections. To see the full list of 2023 grant winners, [click here](#).

A prominent connection between this year's grant films is a focus on community, represented in diverse forms across the United States. Starting on the west coast, Eddie Wong's *Pieces of a Dream* (1974), to be preserved by Visual Communications, tells the story of immigrant farm laborers who settled in the Sacramento River Delta town of Locke—a National Historic Landmark District—from the 1880s to 1970s. It examines the plight of Filipino farm workers stranded in rural poverty, the travails of a Japanese American farming family, and the history of the Chinese who constructed the Delta levees, reclaimed the farmlands, and built Locke itself. *Pieces of a Dream* reveals that behind Locke's image of a preserved tourist landmark lies a threatened community.



Pieces of a Dream (1974) will be preserved by Visual Communications with NFPF support.

From west to southeast: UNC Chapel Hill will preserve ten home movies filmed between 1925 and 1941 at the Penn School on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina. Now a National Historic Landmark District, the school was founded by northern missionaries in 1862 as one of the first to educate formerly enslaved West Africans, and eventually became an industrial school on the Hampton-Tuskegee model advocated by Booker T. Washington.

Further south, Appalshop Archives will preserve *Beyond Measure* (1994) by Herb E. Smith, who co-founded Appalshop in 1969. His documentary looks at the loss of thousands of coal mining jobs following the mechanization of coalfield labor and documents the efforts of citizens to rebuild their communities. Interviewees discuss the beauty and challenges of living in the mountains and describe how extended families and attachments to the land are more important than what economists can measure.

Mississippi Triangle (1984), slated for preservation by Third World Newsreel, documents the power relations and divisions of labor between Asian, Black, and white communities in the Mississippi Delta region. Praised by scholar Scott Macdonald as “one of the more unusual collaborative experiments in the history of American independent cinema,” the film was made by three crews, each focused on—and represented by—a specific ethnicity. Eschewing a narrator, the film depicts locals such as Luck Wing and Unita Blackwell, both “firsts” as Chinese American and Black women mayors of small towns in Mississippi.



The titular soon-to-be-reformed hoodlum in *Shades* (1960), to be preserved by the Yale Film Archive with

Almost as eclectic as the community portraits are the sponsored films to be saved by this year's grants. Knox

County Public Library will preserve *The Four Pillars of Income* (1939), produced by C.W. “Bill” Bailey, President of the First National Bank of Clarksville, Tennessee, who advocated for his agrarian clientele to embrace crop rotation. The Hagley Museum and Library will preserve *Where’s Joe* (1972), produced by Cinecraft Productions (founded in 1938 and still in operation) for the leadership of the United Steelworkers Union and a collection of American steel companies. The Yale Film Archive will preserve *Shades* (1960), a short film produced by the City College of New York’s Institute of Film Techniques for the NYC Department of Correction that tells the story of a fictional hoodlum whose rehabilitation was meant to instruct fledgling correction officers.

Also slated for preservation are two renowned documentaries: UCLA Film & Television Archive will safeguard *In the Best Interests of the Children* (1977), which uses interviews and observational footage to examine the challenges faced by lesbian mothers in keeping custody of their children. Eight families detail their experiences with custody, children’s fathers, and the courts. Produced by Iris Films, founded by five lesbian filmmakers, the film draws attention to the testing and scrutiny lesbian mothers were subjected to and suffered under.

The cult classic *Demon Lover Diary* (1980), to be preserved by the Chicago Film Society, is a behind-the-scenes look at the production of an independent horror film shot in Michigan in 1975. *Diary* director Joel DeMott chronicled the unglamorous reality of low-budget moviemaking—everything from amateurish mistakes to borrowing firearms from Ted Nugent—and provided present-tense commentary. The result was acclaimed by *Film Comment* as “positively crucial to documentary film history.”



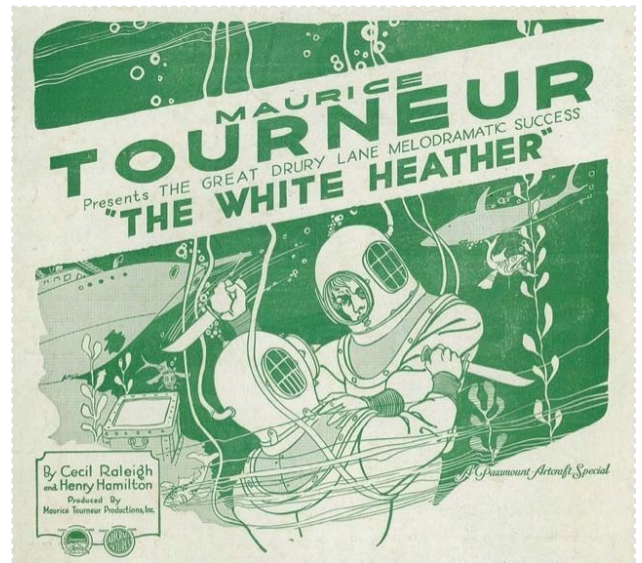
Demon Lover Diary (1980) will be preserved by the Chicago Film Society with NFPF support.

The San Francisco Silent Festival will preserve a fiction film long thought lost: *The White Heather* (1919), directed by Maurice Tourneur, one of the most highly regarded silent era filmmakers. The silent melodrama, which follows the suffering family of a dastardly aristocrat, has a supporting cast including John Gilbert, Gibson Gowland (*Greed*), and Ben Hamilton (*Dragnet*). It climaxes with an underwater fight shot in Los Angeles Harbor using the Williamson Submarine tube. *Variety* called the film “an absolute masterpiece” that stood out “on the strength of the thrills that the camera made possible and which could not be secured on the stage.”

Further highlights of this year’s grants include home movies of astronaut David Scott (the seventh man to walk on the moon) at the 50th edition of the Indianapolis 500; footage of the construction of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge filmed by an employee of the Hills Bros. Coffee Company; John Marshall’s ethnographic study *N/um Tchai: A Celebration of the Dance of the !Kung Bushmen* (1969); tropical research films shot in the 1930s by ichthyologist Gloria Hollister; *Cutting a Quill* (1959), a documentary on calligrapher John Howard Benson assembled from footage shot by Robert Flaherty and Richard Leacock; and footage of 1950s visits to Africa by pioneering African American actress and singer Etta Moten Barnett and her husband Claude, founder of the Associated Negro Press, America’s largest Black-owned news agency.

Since its creation by Congress in 1996, the NFPF has provided preservation support to 337 institutions across the country to save more than 2,760 films. Its grants—which provide support to create a film preservation master and two access copies of each work—are made possible by funds authorized through *The Library of Congress Sound Recording and Film Preservation Programs Reauthorization Act of 2016*—secured through the leadership of the Library of Congress—and the contributions of public-spirited donors. A curated selection of the preserved films is available for viewing on the NFPF [website](#), and more than 260 [additional titles](#) have been made accessible by our grant recipients.

Tags: [NFPF grants](#)



The White Heather (1919) will be preserved by the San Francisco Silent Film Festival through an NFPF grant.